



# The New Prophecy and "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in the "Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas" by Rex D. Butler

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BUTLER, REX D. *The New Prophecy and "New Visions": Evidence of Montanism in the "Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas."* North American Patristic Society Patristic Monograph Series, vol. 18. Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2006. xvii+211 pp. \$44.95 (cloth).

The *Martyrdom or Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas* is a compelling early third-century document from North Africa, which includes visions of a dragon and bodily transformation, perhaps a woman martyr's diary, and poignant deaths. Scholars have long debated what exactly this document is. Does it indeed contain authentic diaries and the voice of an editor? Is that editor the famous Carthaginian Tertullian? Is the *Martyrdom* a so-called Montanist text—that is, is it to be associated with the prophetic renewal movement of the late second century and beyond, which some considered heretical?

Rex Butler's revised dissertation (Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) takes up especially the latter question, deciding it in the affirmative. A brief introduction surveys relevant scholarship. Chapter 1 is an outline of "Montanism," Cyril of Jerusalem's fourth-century neologism for a community that seems to have gathered around the prophet Montanus and the prophetesses Maximilla and Priscilla in the second half of the second century. Butler uses the sources (without clear attention to their polemical aims) to provide a history of the origins, the spread to the West, and teachings of this community, which called itself the "New Prophecy."

Chapter 2 discusses the authorship of the *Passion*, reviewing the scholarship on the various knotty problems in the field. Does philological analysis of the *Passion* tell us something about whether the text has one author or three? Can it prove whether Tertullian is the editor? Butler provides a good review of scholarship and offers his conservative but balanced conclusion that "arguments for Tertullian's editorship outweigh but do not overwhelm arguments to the contrary." He also argues that Perpetua "submitted her diary to the editor" and thus that she and her companions must have shared a Montanist worldview with the editor (57).

In chapter 3 Butler discovers in the *Passion* "allusions both Montanist and Catholic" (58). He summarizes the text, pointing out parallels in other Jewish and early Christian literature. Butler concludes the chapter with a review of "Montanist themes" in the *Passion*, highlighting especially the authority of confessors, references to the Holy Spirit, acknowledgment of contemporary charismata, the participation of women in visionary experiences and leadership, women who reject or ignore their husbands, the ecstatic nature of the visions, and what the author sees as evidence of glossolalia in the text. Elizabeth Castelli's *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York, 2004) offers a brilliant reading of death, gender, prophetic authority, and editorial control in the *Passion* in particular, and this chapter would have been strengthened by attending to such insights and method. That the *Passion* is a Montanist document is, for Butler, further confirmed by allusions in the *Passion* to Revelation and other apocalyptic literature, as well as the *Passion*'s reference to ritual cheese eating (see Epiphanius's *Artotyrites*). Butler sketches out his understanding that "the Catholics marginalize[d] ecstasy, prophecy, and glossolalia . . . in favor of ecclesiastical establishment" (92).

Chapter 4 places the text of the *Passion* within a literary and historical context. Butler mainly traces its later uses by "orthodox" Christians and tries to explain why and how a "Montanist" text would be embraced by the likes of

Augustine. "By the time formal schism developed between Montanists and Catholics, the *Passion* and its protagonists had become dear to the entire Christian community," Butler states (105). There is a useful section about how the Greek translation downplays prophetic elements and mentions of the Spirit found in the Latin. Augustine's and Quodvultdeus's sermons on Perpetua and Felicitas are discussed, as well as other martyrdom accounts: the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, the martyrs of Vienne and Lyons, and other North African martyrdom stories. Butler concludes by summarizing the evidence of Montanist influence in the *Passion*, and then by evaluating what the *Passion* teaches about Montanism in early Christianity.

This book has two primary and linked weaknesses. First, it does not sufficiently take into account the polemical nature of the evidence that we have about those who were accused of Montanism (or the New Prophecy or Priscillianists or Quintillianists or Tascodrugians). Early Christian heresiologists proliferate, rabbit-like, names for "heretics" whom they do not approve. We must go back to the full sources, especially Eusebius and Epiphanius, to see what was at stake for each in embedding earlier sources against the New Prophecy into their own narratives and in offering the tantalizing and titillating stories of prophetesses leaving their husbands and claiming the name "virgin" despite loose sexuality, of babies being pierced with needles in ritual, of ecstatic sayings. As I have argued, there is no clear history of Montanism but a rocky trail of ancient polemic and modern investments in a story of the pure, prophetic origins of Christianity and its subsequent routinization into something more ecclesiastically manageable.

Butler states that one cannot call the earliest phases of "Montanism" heretical (29; see also 43). Yet throughout—and this is the book's second weakness—it contrasts orthodoxy and late second- and early third-century Montanism, the "Catholic church," and this sect with "paranormal" activities (43, and see quotations above). Butler's analysis would be aided by recent analyses, such as that of Judith Lieu, Daniel Boyarin, and Karen King, of the categories of orthodoxy and heresy and of the permeability of groups we formerly considered fairly airtight, such as Christians and Jews. Butler's book is clearly organized, lucidly written, and offers useful rehearsals of past scholarship on the *Passion*, which is undoubtedly one of our most interesting early Christian texts.

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DIPPLE, GEOFFREY. *"Just as in the Time of the Apostles": Uses of History in the Radical Reformation*. Kitchener, Ontario: Pandora Press, 2005. 324 pp. \$30.00 (paper).

Geoffrey Dipple's *Just as in the Time of the Apostles* is a reevaluation of the place of historical reflection among "Radical" reformers during the Reformation era in early modern Europe. More specifically, Dipple challenges the central thesis of Franklin Littell's *The Origins of Sectarian Protestantism: A Study of the Anabaptist View of the Church* (New York, 1964). According to Littell, what distinguished "Anabaptists proper" (i.e., the "Evangelical Anabaptists": Swiss Brethren, Hutterites, Marpeckites, and Dutch Mennonites) from the Renaissance humanists and Magisterial reformers (state-sanctioned Protestants) was a genuine commitment from the very beginning of the movement to a restitution of the primitive church of the apostles. Dipple argues that because Littell relies on

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